



South Central District Health

Keeping your family & community healthy

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CRYPTOSPORIDIOSIS

What is cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis is a disease caused by a parasite called *Cryptosporidium parvum*. Cryptosporidiosis was responsible for a large drinking water outbreak of diarrheal disease in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1993.

Who can get cryptosporidiosis?

Anyone, but it may be more common in persons with impaired immune systems and in children in daycare centers.

Where is this parasite found?

Cryptosporidium is found in the digestive systems of infected animals and humans. Any pet, farm animal or wild animal, including birds, fish, and reptiles, can become infected. Calves are the most likely animals to be infected. When infected animals or humans go to the bathroom, they pass *Cryptosporidium* oocysts (egg-like forms of the organism) in their stools.

How is cryptosporidiosis spread?

People or animals become infected by swallowing the oocysts. This can occur after touching stools from infected humans or animals or after handling objects contaminated with infected stool material. Unwashed hands can then transfer the oocysts to the mouth. Persons and animals can also become infected by drinking water or eating raw or undercooked food contaminated with stool material from infected animals or humans. Some people have become sick after swimming in public pools contaminated with stools from infected persons.

What are the symptoms of cryptosporidiosis?

The major symptoms are watery diarrhea and abdominal cramping. Vomiting and low-grade fever may occur. Symptoms may come and go and generally last for two weeks, but may continue for a month. Many people do not have any symptoms.

Can cryptosporidiosis cause severe problems?

In persons who lack normal immune function, cryptosporidiosis can cause severe, life-threatening diarrhea and has been associated with liver and gall bladder disease. Persons at greatest risk for severe problems include those having HIV infection, receiving cancer chemotherapy or taking drugs that suppress the immune system.

How soon after exposure do symptoms occur?

After swallowing the oocysts, illness may occur in about two to ten days.

What should I do if I think I have cryptosporidiosis?

See your physician as soon as possible, especially if your immune system is suppressed. If your doctor suspects cryptosporidiosis, you will be asked to submit a stool sample. Diagnosis is made by using special stains on the sample and then examining it under a microscope. Not all laboratories have the capability or experience to do the test and it must be specifically requested by the doctor.

Should infected people be excluded from school or work?

Since *Cryptosporidium* is passed in the stool, children and staff in daycare centers, health care workers, or people who handle food should not go to school or work while they have diarrhea. After diarrhea ends, persons may return to work or school but they should carefully wash their hands after using the toilet.

What is the treatment for cryptosporidiosis?

People with healthy immune systems usually get well on their own. People with diarrhea should drink plenty of fluids. Currently, there are no antibiotics proven to be effective, although one is being studied.

Can people who get cryptosporidiosis get it again?

It is unknown whether past infection means people are protected from getting it again.

How can cryptosporidiosis be prevented?

1. Avoid water or food that may be contaminated, including unpasteurized milk. Do not drink water directly from streams, lakes, springs or any unknown source. If you suspect your drinking water is unsafe, bring it to a rolling boil for one minute prior to using.
2. Always wash hands with soap and water:
 - After using the toilet or changing diapers
 - Before handling food
 - After handling stools from animals
 - After gardening or other direct contact with soil
3. If you work in a child-care center where you change children's diapers, wash hands properly between each child. If you use gloves, change gloves between each child.
4. If you take care of cryptosporidiosis patients, wash hands after bathing patients, emptying bedpans, changing soiled linen, or otherwise coming in contact with the patients' stools.
5. If you have cryptosporidiosis, wash your hands often to prevent spreading the disease to other members of your household.
6. Persons with diarrhea should not use public swimming facilities.